

# UTAH ARCHITECT

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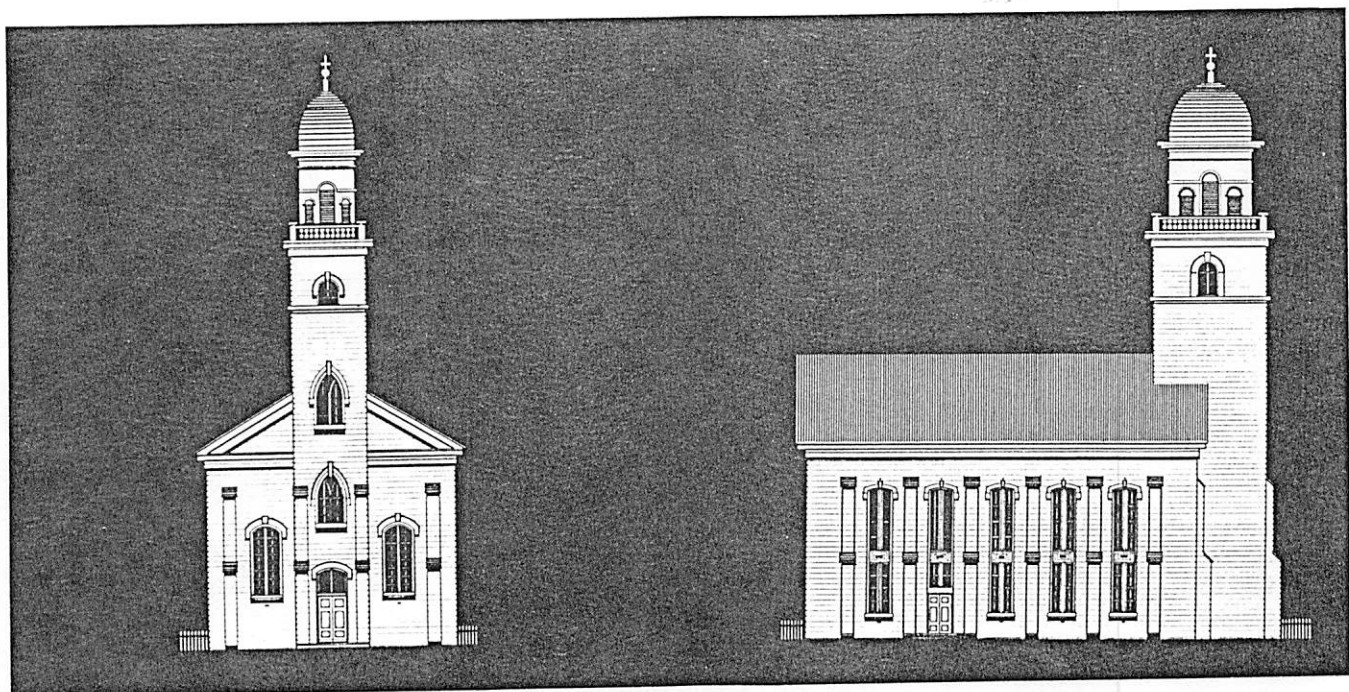


Illustration by Noel Fagerlund

## THE WASATCH STAKE TABERNACLE

JOHN JAMES

Last fall a number of Utahns remembered something Wallace Stegner had written several years ago in his nostalgic essay in *Vogue Magazine*: "I hate to write about a place I am fond of, because if I make it sound as good as I think it is, I may encourage other people, including entrepreneurs, to overrun and 'improve' it. But to record my love affair with the Heber Valley . . . seems reasonably safe. The place has a way of corroborating itself over the years; every time I revisit it I get an almost spooky repetition of satisfactions I have felt there before. The only people who have so far improved it have, by dint of good sense and good taste, spoiled nothing".

Many of us who feel the same way about Heber Valley were alarmed and appalled to read that the valley's most prominent landmark, the handsome old Wasatch Stake Tabernacle, was to be demolished. Fortunately we were able to raise such a cry of anguish and despair that the wrecking crews have not yet been summoned. The Tabernacle still stands today, proud and stately, although somewhat neglected by its peculiarly uncaring care-takers, but its future is in doubt.

On May 4, 1889, however, its future was just beginning; the newly-born *Wasatch Wave* exuberantly reported: "The Stake House is finished and cleaned in beautiful style ready for dedication tomorrow. Conference visitors are expected to clean their feet before entering the building and leave their knives and pencils and tobacco at home". It was an especially happy occasion for Abram Hatch, the Stake President, who had initiated the idea for the new Stake House, and who

had meticulously superintended its construction every step of the way since ground was broken in 1887. With justification he felt that it was the finest church building in all of Utah.

The entire project was built with donated labor and materials. The red sandstone was quarried by hand from the mountains east of Heber City near Lake Creek, and hauled to the site by church members who furnished their own teams. With no railroad into the valley there were many problems in connection with transporting all the necessary materials to the construction site. Alex Fortie was the supervising "architect", according to the records, and he directed all carpentry work; Elisha Averett was in charge of masonry work; Francis Kirby supervised the painting; Frederick O. Buell managed the cutting and laying of the sheet metal shingles. These are but a few of the many people who worked to erect the valley's largest and finest building—the people whose names were reported in the newspaper—but of course there were hundreds of others who "helped". Historian Edward W. Tullidge, duly impressed with the edifice as it neared completion, preserved this information: "The building is 50 x 95 feet . . . thirty feet in height to the square. It is built on a heavy foundation, which is five feet wide at the bottom, and tapers upward to three feet at the top. The walls are two feet thick . . . covered with a self-supporting wood and iron roof. The tower is built of rock and extends about ten feet above the ridge of the roof. From this point the tower will be completed in red wood and metal extending about twenty-five feet, making it in all about ninety feet high to the top of the weather vane. The tower is fourteen feet square . . . the walls of the building are strengthened by buttresses on the sides, front and rear . . . Galleries are erected on each side and end. The capacity is 1,500 . . ."

The good people of Heber City, so many of whom had toiled and sacrificed to build it, quite naturally took special pains to furnish and maintain their beautiful new Stake House. The floors were scrubbed and bleached with homemade soap; homemade carpets were carefully laid down the aisles; the hard benches were

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### SALTAIR REVISITED (Cont'd)

freshening of the main body of the Lake brought about by salt migration to the northwest body where interchange of water has been impeded by the construction of the railroad embankment. Freshening will cause greater water loss and result in a level of water several feet lower than if the Lake remained in its natural condition. There are other substantial difficulties.

So it appears, first that any resort on the open shore of the Lake and subject to the detrimental influences of the Lake faces a dismal future and large investment is not warranted. Second, it is better to take a broad expanse of beach which is relatively flat and accessible, where foundation conditions are uniquely advantageous, where utilities are available, and by creating a large embayment form a resort where fluctuation of lake level can be avoided, putrescing organic material can be excluded, the salt content and depth of the water can be kept optimum, and in which bathing, small boating, and similar activities can be pursued free from the impediments of the open lake — storms, for instance. When there are such unusually favorable foundation conditions as those existing at Saltair and when there are structures from which a million dollars of value can be salvaged, and where a major transcontinental highway will bring fifty to a hundred thousand people per day past the door (many of them pleasure-bent tourists), you "have it made". If the embayment is large enough to be a lake itself, a large concession area, superb bathing department and many other features provided, and if the confining bulkhead is a stout pile and timber structure (economically possible only in Great Salt Lake and at Saltair), if the main structure is world-famous and is restored to its original architectural

splendor, and if the construction is so designed that a visitor to Saltair can not see the top of the outer bulkhead nor distinguish between embayment and open lake as he looks lakeward, the advantages multiply. Dredging beyond the outer bulkhead will keep the water line of the Lake near the bulkhead at any likely future lake level and furnish material to fill to a level above high water the lake bed shoreward of the embayment, then this area can be covered with glistening salt by evaporating lake water on it. Trains occasionally are run to Saltair currently — and the railroad plays a part in the restoration. We have come full circle so that now a ride on a steam train, particularly one with old fashioned equipment, is a much sought amusement venture. Thus the railroad is to be used as a tourist attraction although most people will come to the resort in their own automobiles — for which ample road access and parking are to be provided.

Answers, then, to the questions are: Saltair is to be restored because a far superior Lake resort can be created there, one with sufficient permanence to warrant confident investment. There is no better place, in fact no other place at all which does not have serious disadvantages. The answers to the remaining questions have been given more or less directly in the preceding discussion.

The owner does not regard the property as a "white elephant on a dead sea". Rather the owner regards it as an unusually good opportunity to attract visitors from distant places as well as local citizens — to a place where they can have close contact with and enjoy a great, unique and absorbingly interesting natural feature; doing so with distinct economic benefit to the community and in a manner conforming to the rules of good business practice.

### THE WASATCH STAKE TABERNACLE (Cont'd)

sanded and smoothed and polished. Pot-bellied stoves were set in each of the four corners, coal oil lamps were hung from the ceiling, and finally, a large bell was placed in the tower. The surrounding grounds were landscaped and cottonwood trees were planted; fresh garden flowers were brought in to decorate the impressive three-tiered "stand". Indeed, this building was something to be proud of.

Of course there was a definite seating arrangement prescribed by the authorities: men on the south side, women on the north, and mixed couples in the center; mothers with babies sat around the stoves in the rear corners. "The four big pot-bellied stoves were very important. Uncle Jesse Bond went religiously from one to the other stirring them noisily and replenishing the coal . . . if the stirrings came at the climax of a great sermon or in the middle of a soprano solo, it made no difference to Uncle Jesse . . . President Hatch, who had traveled outside the state, used to tell us about the furnaces and heating plants which might be installed to take the place of the stoves, but it all sounded

fantastic to us" — so reminisces one of the pioneer women.

Are there only a few of us left today who feel like Mr. Steger does? In this old building too inefficient and outmoded after seventy-five years of constant use to continue to serve as a place of worship? Does the Tabernacle still have sufficient cultural and historic significance to the community and to the state to justify its preservation? Does there exist in the hearts of the people of Utah a strong enough desire to retain some of the few monuments of our irreplaceable pioneer heritage? Fred L. Markham, Chairman, Committee on Preservation of Historic Buildings, Utah Chapter of American Institute of Architects, has raised these same questions in a letter to the editor of the *Wasatch Wave* (which by the way is still going strong at age seventy-six): "Those in the state who hope that each pioneer community will retain some monument to give future generations the thrill of immediate contact with their pioneer past, are eagerly awaiting the decision, and stand ready to assist where and when called upon".

Let us save the Heber Tabernacle!